



Jacopo Bilivert and the Rospigliosi cup

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FEW art objects in the Metropolitan Museum of Art have attracted as much interest as the Rospigliosi Cup, made of gold, enamel and jewels, and attributed to Benvenuto Cellini (see colour plates). This celebrity is due not only to the cup's association with two famous names, but even more so to its highly unusual design and the virtuosity of execution. Little is known about the history of the cup, which is believed to have been the property of the Rospigliosi for centuries; it may have come into the family as a presentation piece to the Rospigliosi pope, Clement IX (1667-1669). After Prince D. Clementi Rospigliosi of Rome had parted with the cup, Mr. B. Altman acquired it in 1909 through Charles Wertheimer of London, and bequeathed it to the Metropolitan Museum in 1914.

The design consists of a large conch shell, carried upon the wings and tail of a dragon, perched upon the back of a tortoise with outstretched head and tail. The shell, with a small red crab inside, is surmounted by a winged sea-sphinx, whose head is crowned with a diadem, and whose ears and chest are hung with pearls. A small gold ring, fastened to the wings of the sphinx, may have served to secure the precious cup to a base, by means of a padlocked chain.

Although traditionally attributed to Cellini, it must be stated at once that the thought of combining naturalistic and fantastic form, as seen on the cup, would never have occurred to Cellini. The only example of his goldsmith's work that survives, the gold salt in Vienna completed for François Ier of France in 1543, and a few drawings for similar work show clearly that even in his decorative work Cellini paid tribute to the human form above all; for Italian artists were at all times conscious of their classical inheritance and therefore primarily attracted by the human form.

Cellini's occasional extravagant creations are usually conceived as framework for his figures, as may be seen on the marble base of the Perseus in Florence. The Rospigliosi Cup however, displays grotesque and natural form in perfect balance. This is an unfamiliar occurrence in Italian art, at least before the baroque age, but one which was frequently explored by Netherlandish masters. Their tradition has always been to draw and model primarily from life, to attain the utmost truthfulness. But occasionally these artists experienced an urge to escape from the realities of every day life into flights of fancy. This may explain the occurrence of strange, fanciful creatures, birds and beasts which, however, are rendered with life-like detail. In Italy, by contrast, such fanciful creatures tend to appear more stylised. They originate from the stucco decoration of the Domus Aurea, the Golden House of Nero on the Palatine in Rome, whereas

those of the Netherlands would seem to derive from fairy tales, proverbs and other folklore.

The Rospigliosi Cup shows considerable affinity to the designs for goldsmith's work by Cornelis Floris. His *Cups and Jugs* (Nos. 1 & 2) published in Antwerp by Hieronymus Cock in 1548, is a sequence of fantastic models for execution in precious or semi-precious metal, in combination with sea-shells held in position by hinged strapwork. These vessels are supported upon the shoulders or wings of satyrs, tritons or sea-monsters which are riding, or standing, on snails or turtles. Handles and spouts, where required, were added with unrestrained freedom of imagination. Each of these unusual vessels stands upon a conventional circular foot that stabilizes the whimsical design and anchors the vessel to the ground.

It is this delight in fanciful compositions that links the Rospigliosi Cup to the engraved designs by Cornelis Floris and suggests to us that it may have been the work of a goldsmith from the Netherlands. On the other hand, the cup does not seem to be completely Netherlandish in spirit, for it differs from the standard designs by Floris in its clearly defined outlines and in the firm sculptural quality that renders an additional base unnecessary. In a word, restraint has been imposed upon the exuberant Floris design, though happily without loss of originality or humour. It is suggested that this restraint is Italian in origin. In this connection it should be remembered that during the reign of Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici (1576-1587) many northern artists were attracted to his court in Florence. Their names are recorded in the *Registri della Guardaroba*, the account books listing those employed by the Medici. Unfortunately, their work can rarely be identified, since none had attained the prominence of the Flemish-born sculptor Giambologna, whose activities Vasari and others described in great detail. Giambologna's presence in Florence from 1557, and his enormous success there, seems to have attracted other Flemings; not only sculptors eager to become his apprentices but also masters well versed in the decorative arts.

The Grand Duke's interest in the latter is well documented. Montaigne reports in his *Journal du Voyage en Italy*, 1580-81, that Francesco de' Medici participated in stone cutting and other activities which he sponsored in the workshops of the Casino da S. Marco. In 1581, he approved the plans for the Tribuna at the Uffizi, where he installed cabinets specially designed for the display of his collections. The Grand Duke obviously wished to emulate the new image of the ruler as collector and patron of the arts, created by his contemporary, Emperor Rudolph II, who transferred his famous *Kunstammer*

Colour. The Rospigliosi Cup, composed of gold, enamels and pearls. Height 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, length 9 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Bequest of Benjamin Altman).



1 & 2. Cornelis Floris. Two engraved designs from the series *Cups and Jugs*, published in Antwerp-1548. Cabinet Edmond de Rothschild, Musée du Louvre.

from the less accessible Schloss Ambras near Innsbruck to the imperial residence in Prague.

It is therefore not surprising, that one of the truly remarkable Netherlandish artists, whose name appears repeatedly in the Grand Duke's account books, is the goldsmith John Bylivelt of Delft, better known as Jacopo Delfe or Bilivert. Baldinucci (IV, p. 301) refers to him as Jacopo Giaches. Bilivert lived in Augsburg until 1573, when Francesco de' Medici invited him to Florence. He accepted the offer and arrived a few months later, when he received ten scudi to cover his travel expenses 'per esser venuto da Augusta a qui servirla'. When Bilivert arrived in Florence, he seems to have been only in his early twenties, for a portrait of him by Hans von Aachen, painted at least a decade later, shows him to be in his early thirties. He was obviously possessed of a precocious talent. He was at once appointed director of the Duke's gallery ('Provveditore della real galleria') and shortly thereafter became a member of the Flemish-German Company of Santa Barbara, together with the half-dozen German goldsmiths who had travelled with him from Augsburg to Florence.

Bilivert's name appears in Florentine account books in connection with the gold and enamel setting of the lapis lazuli vessel by Bernardo Buontalenti, which is now in the Argenteria of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence (No. 3). Since it is thought that the vessel in the Argenteria and the Rospigliosi Cup have points closely in common, it is well to examine this extraordinary work in some detail. Firstly it is found that in 1583 the Grand Duke ordered Bilivert to provide the setting and cover 'guarni-

zione et il coperchio' for this famous vessel, designed and carved by Buontalenti, who was Francesco's chief architect, theatrical designer, director of the Medici porcelain works, lapidary and artistic adviser at large. Bilivert received the necessary amount of gold between March and April of 1584, and he was furnished with sketches which must have been similar to the one of vase and setting by Buontalenti at the Uffizi (No. 4). The basic form of the winged double-tailed sea-sphinxes at the shoulders of the vase is Buontalenti's invention, who carved their bodies in lapis, leaving to Bilivert the task of adding heads and necks in gold and coloured enamel (Nos. 5 & 6). Bilivert's contribution is typical of the work then referred to as 'fatto alla fiamminga', in which imaginary form is treated with astounding realism. The heads of the sea-sphinxes, crowned with diadems, are reserved in gold. Their cold perfection, and their clear-cut, strong features, resemble those of Giambologna's female allegories (No. 7). But, unlike the sculptor's alluring statues, these heads crown elongated necks which are half scale-patterned, half ribbed, and show how natural form can be artfully turned into pure ornament.

It is precisely this style, distinguished by infinite devotion to detail—often observed in nature yet applied to grotesque creatures—that links the Rospigliosi Cup to Bilivert's gold and enamelled setting on the Buontalenti vessel of 1583. No other mannerist goldsmith, then active in Florence, knew how to realize strong form in precious material with equal virtuosity. The generous treatment of the clearly defined shell lends to the cup the same vigorous appeal, as does the heavy gold link-chain



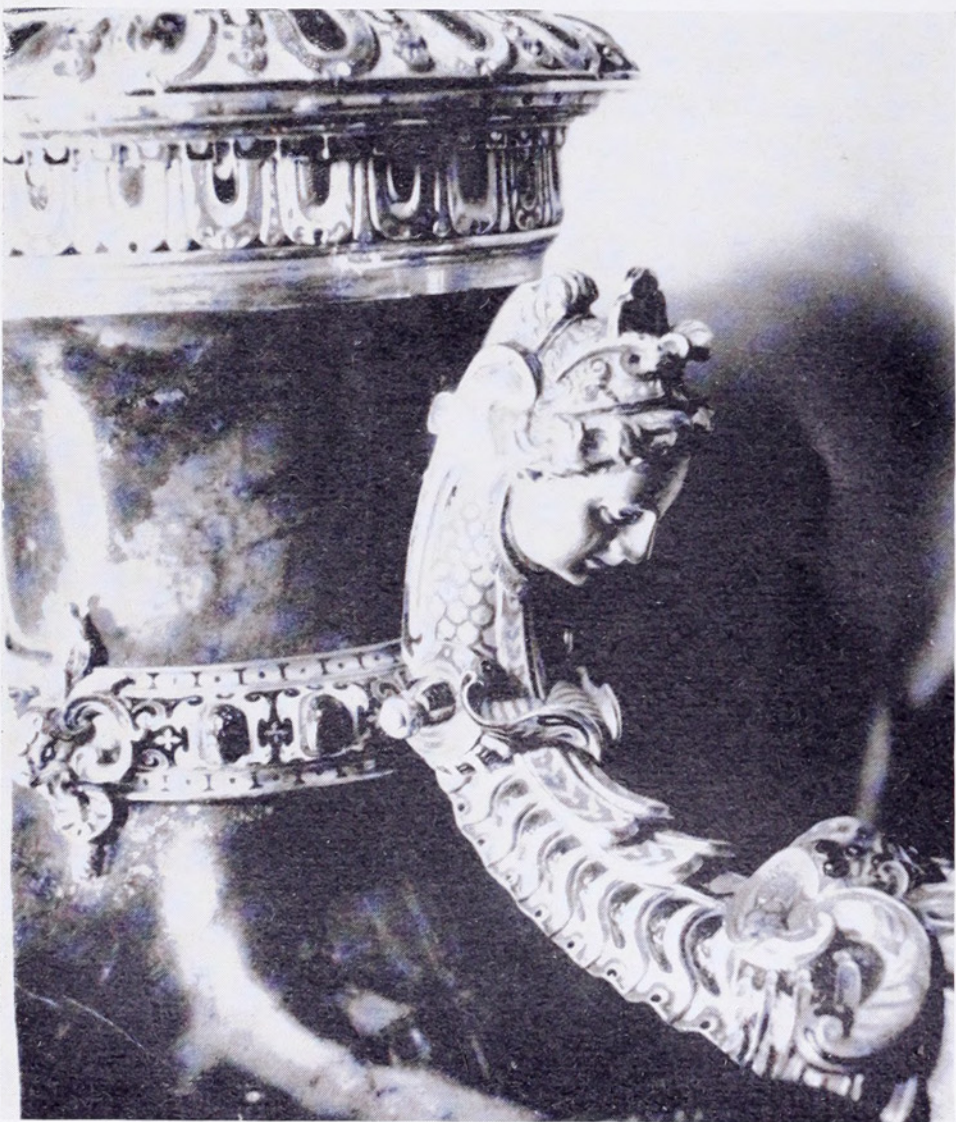
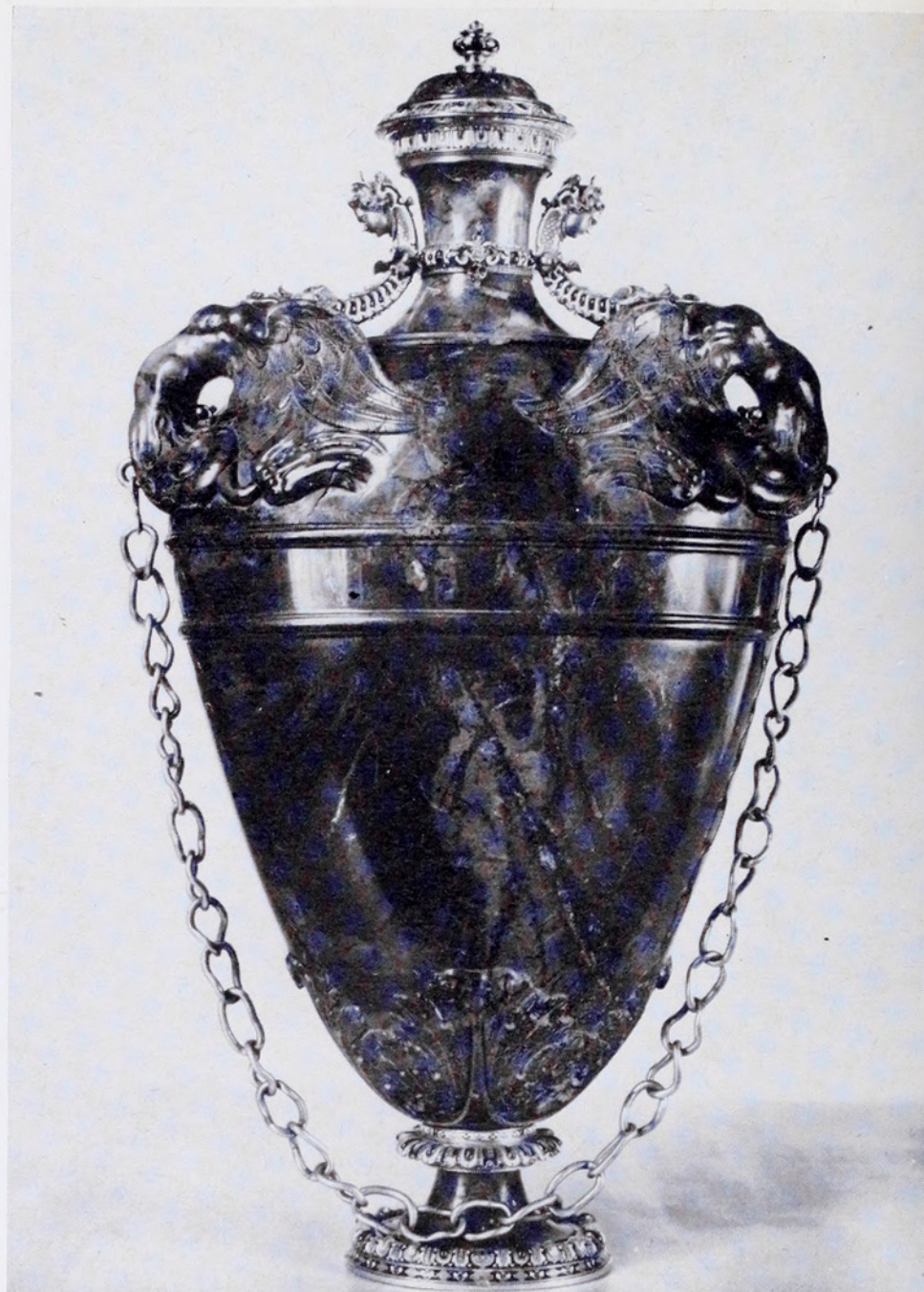
3. Bernardo Buontalenti and Jacopo Bilivert. Lapis lazuli vessel in the form of a shell with gold and enamel handle formed as a sea snake. *Museo degli Argenti, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.*

for the lapis lazuli vessel. We note that Bilivert followed Italian taste when modelling that shell. For goldsmiths working in the north for northern clients would surely have preferred to include a real shell as part of such a composition. We may recall a similar practice, characteristic of northern jewellers, who incorporated baroque pearls into figural pendants to emphasise their rare, or even unique, characters. But Italy's classical tradition was too strong to allow this extravagant use of natural substances. Not even the introduction of the 'style rustique' by Riccio in Padua about 1500 had tempted Italian artists to go further than to cast reptiles and other small animal forms in bronze, for objects that served as oil lamps, candlesticks or inkwells. North of the Alps, however, the intriguing possibilities presented by the combination of natural substances with silver, silver-gilt or gold, were fully explored, particularly in regions where overseas trade made rare materials readily available.

The tortoise at the base of the Rospigliosi Cup may have been modelled from life. Black and yellow enamel follows the natural pattern, including, as it does, illusionary highlights applied in yellow enamel within black. Part of the fascination of the Cup is due to the daring combination of the life-like, earth-bound tortoise with the fabulous winged dragon, and the way they

view one another with obvious curiosity. The dragon ('alla maniera fiamminga') is rendered with astonishing realism, particularly by comparison with Buontalenti's python (No. 8) drawn for the intermezzo, *Apollo and the Python*, that was performed at the wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinand I and Christine of Lorraine in 1589, at the Uffizi theatre. This python displays an intensely dramatic character, aroused, as it is, by Apollo's well-aimed arrow. The rigged outlines of the cornered monster convey the impression of quickened heart-beats, and the wide-open jaws that of fiery breath. This is an admirable example of Buontalenti's versatility as an artist and illustrates that he knew exactly when to be dramatic and when to be factual. His drawings for gold-mounted, semi-precious stone vessels, by contrast, are executed with the utmost precision, and occasionally include bird forms drawn in the naturalistic, Netherlandish manner of Bilivert, whose relationship to him was that of a recently arrived younger master, who initially depended upon the guidance of the older, well established one. Indeed, it would seem as if Bilivert and Buontalenti had established an ideal working relationship of give-and-take which resulted in a co-operation of intriguing originality.

This blending of Italian and Netherlandish attitudes is evident



4. Bernardo Buontalenti. Design for a lapis lazuli vase of 1583 (see No. 5). *Cabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi, Florence.*

5. Bernardo Buontalenti and Jacopo Bilivert. Lapis lazuli vase with enamelled gold settings engraved with the Medici arms and dated 1583. *Museo degli Argenti, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.*

6. Detail from the Buontalenti lapis lazuli vase of 1583 (see No. 5) the enamelled mounts by the Delft goldsmith Biliverto. *Museo degli Argenti, Florence.*



7. Giambologna. Detail from a bronze architectural figure. Irwin Untermyer Collection, New York.



8. Bernardo Buontalenti. A Python, drawing for the intermezzo of 'Apollo and the Python'. Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence.

in a drawing by Buontalenti in the Uffizi, depicting a vase, mounted in gold (No. 9). The handles, in the form of peacock's heads on long necks, resemble the corresponding parts of the Rospigliosi dragon. Related to this design are two further lapis lazuli vessels by Buontalenti at the Argenteria, with gold enamel mounts that we also attribute to Bilivert. One is the ewer with a gold and white enamel swan's head and neck serving as a spout (No. 10), the other is in the form of a large vessel in the form of a shell, with a sea-serpent as handle, whose scaled body is enamelled green, whereas the bird-like head and fish tail are reserved in gold (No. 3).

The Netherlandish character of this swan-shaped gold mount appears in even clearer light when compared to Antwerp engravings which had served as sources of inspiration for such work. These were frequently chosen from the illustrations of natural history books, such as Jacques Floris's *Veelderhande cierlycke Compertementen*, engraved by Harman Mueller, and published in Antwerp 1564 by Hans Liefvrick (No. 11). Another example of goldsmith's work, inspired by such an engraving, is the white enamelled and jewelled swan in the Hermitage State Museum in Leningrad (No. 12). Occasionally, a drawing forms the link between engraving and goldwork, in which case special emphasis is placed upon clear outlines. We recognize such a drawing in the collection of Baron Max von Buch in Florence (No. 13). It features a dragon, whose wings are patterned with simplified peacock-eyes that resemble those seen on the wings of the Rospigliosi dragon. This minor detail is due to similar Antwerp sources of design for both.

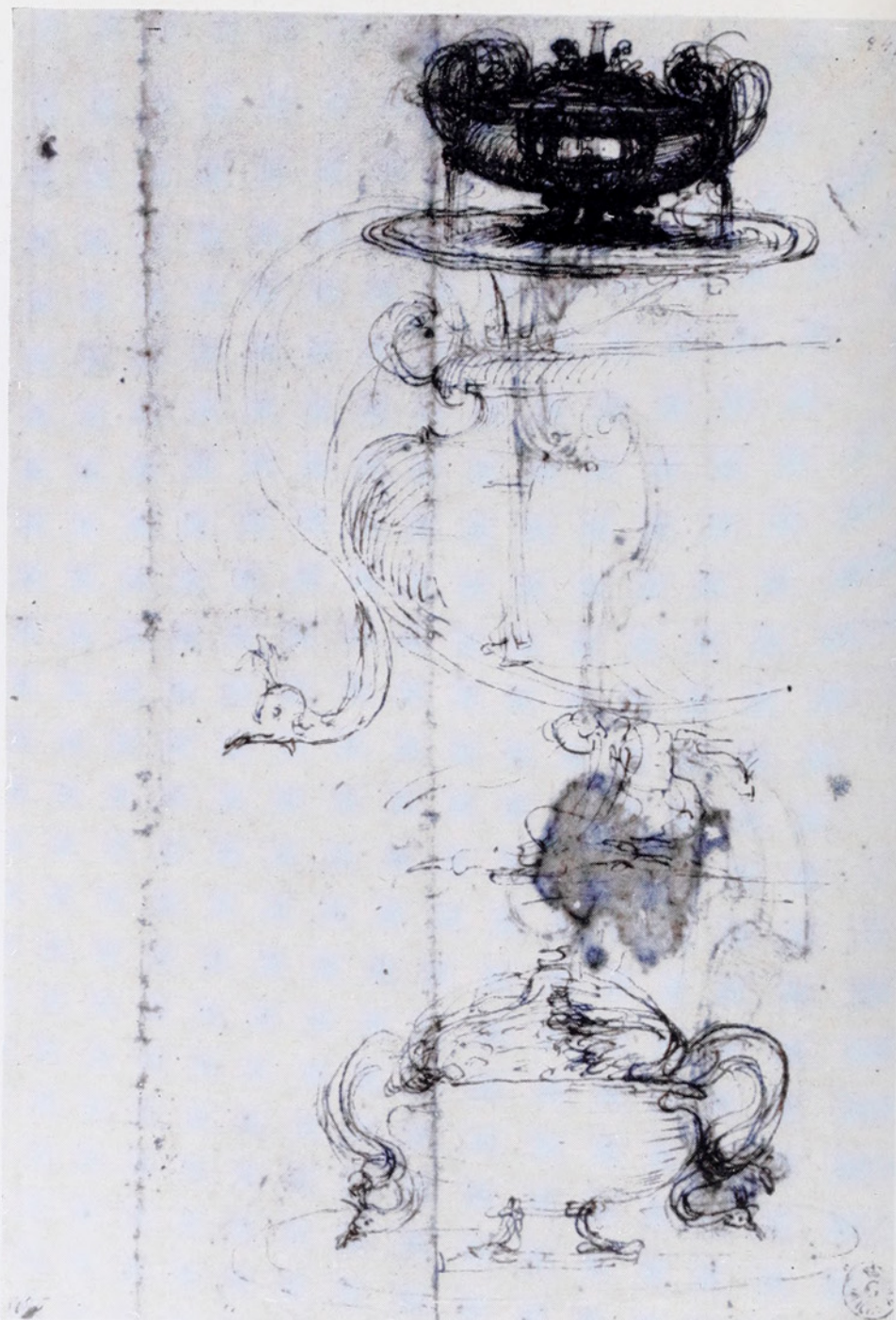
The realisation of these designs in gold was mostly undertaken by uprooted Netherlandish masters, who had fled their native country before or immediately after the sack of Antwerp in 1576, for few wished to work for their luxury-loving Spanish overlords. Those who emigrated settled near the courts of great rulers and patrons of the arts. Some went to England, Germany and Denmark, others were asked by Emperor Rudolph II to

come to Prague. Jacopo Bilivert, who was probably also a Protestant for he had gone to Germany, followed the invitation of the Grand Duke of Tuscany to Florence. These able masters, dispersed all over Europe, established an international style that was based upon their past experiences and the continuous use of pattern books published in Antwerp. This is precisely why late sixteenth century goldwork is practically impossible to localise, and the recognition of Jacopo Bilivert's contribution is so particularly fortunate. During his years of apprenticeship and travelling, he was evidently young and flexible enough to change his style and adopt that of his new place of residence, Florence; or at least of combining and harmonising the best traditions of the countries he knew.

Thus we see how Bilivert transformed a fanciful northern composition into a small masterpiece of Italian sculpture, in which unconventional form is treated with a virtuosity, hitherto associated with Cellini only. This erroneous attribution must be taken as a supreme compliment to the almost forgotten goldsmith, Jacopo Bilivert.

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9. Bernardo Buontalenti. Design for a semi-precious vessel in gold mounts. *Cabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi, Florence.*

10. Bernardo Buontalenti and Jacopo Bilivert. Lapis lazuli ewer with enamelled gold settings. *Museo degli Argenti, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.*



11. Jacques Floris. Design from *Veelderhande cierlycke Compertementen*, engraved by Harman Mueller and published in Antwerp in 1564 by Hans Lieftrinck. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*



12. Figure of a swan, in gold, white enamel and rubies, by an Antwerp jeweller, 1575-90. *The Hermitage State Museum, Leningrad.*

13. Winged dragon, a goldsmith's drawing after an Antwerp design, second half of the sixteenth century. *Baron Max von Buch Collection, Florence.*

